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SUBJECT: AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR GETS A NEW PRIME MINISTER,
 YET AGAIN

Classified By: Ambassador Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4(b/d)

11. (C) Summary: The Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) Legislative Assembly elected Farooq Haider as AJK prime minister on October 22 -- making him the region's third prime minister since 2006 elections there. Haider previously headed a breakaway faction of AJK's Muslim Conference party, and had held discussions with Nawaz Sharif about establishing a PML-N presence in AJK based on that faction. President Zardari and Pakistan's military establishment opposed the emergence of the PML-N in AJK. A PML-N presence in AJK would have made AJK's political spectrum more closely resemble the political spectrum in Pakistan proper. In the military's view, this would have sent an unwelcome signal to the Indians that Pakistan was ready to absorb AJK on the basis of the status quo -- and recognize Kashmir's Line of Control as an international boundary. To keep the PML-N out of AJK, civilian and military authorities in Islamabad forced Haider's breakaway faction to reunite with the Muslim Conference. Haider's price for agreeing to this was that he be made AJK's prime minister. End Summary.

12. (C) On October 22, Farooq Haider of the Muslim Conference party was elected new prime minister of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) by the region's 49-member Legislative Assembly. (Note: Azad Jammu and Kashmir is a "self-governing" entity administered by, but constitutionally not part of, Pakistan. Its residents, however, are Pakistani citizens. End Note.) Haider is AJK's third prime minister since 2006 AJK elections. Haider replaced Sardar Yacoub Khan, who had been AJK prime minister since January. Muslim Conference head Sardar Attique Ahmed Khan preceded Sardar Yacoub, serving as prime minister from July 2006 to January 2009.

13. (C) Ershad Mahmud, a freelance journalist and commentator on the AJK political scene, explained to Deputy PolCouns on October 26 the political machinations behind the turnover in the AJK prime minister's chair from Sardar Attique to Sardar Yacoub to Farooq Haider.

14. (C) Sardar Attique, the head of AJK's Muslim Conference party, became AJK prime minister in July 2006, after his party took a majority of Legislative Assembly seats in AJK's 2006 elections. According to Mahmud, Attique was close to

then-President Musharraf and Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment, and disliked by PPP leaders in AJK. In January 2009, the PPP and Farooq Haider, a Muslim Conference rival of Sardar Attique, combined forces to oust Attique -- a move supported by President Zardari. Approximately half of the Muslim Conference members of the AJK Legislative Assembly abandoned Attique and joined Haider's "Muslim Conference-Forward Block." With only a minority of the Legislative Assembly behind him, Attique lost a no-confidence vote. Farooq Haider expected to succeed Attique as prime minister, but the PPP refused to support him. Instead, the Legislative Assembly selected a compromise candidate, Sardar Yacoub, as the new prime minister.

¶15. (C) Mahmud explained that a disappointed Farooq Haider subsequently approached Nawaz Sharif about forming a PML-N party in AJK based on his Muslim Conference-Forward Block. However, both President Zardari and the military establishment opposed a PML-N presence in AJK. Zardari naturally wanted to keep the PPP's main competitor out of AJK. The military objected because of perceived broader implications regarding India and the Kashmir issue. AJK's current political spectrum does not mirror the political spectrum in Pakistan proper. AJK's largest political party, the Muslim Conference, exists solely in AJK, as does another key AJK party, the Muslim People's Party. If the PML-N gained a presence in AJK, AJK politics would more closely resemble politics in Pakistan proper, especially since the PPP is already active in AJK. In the military's view, the convergence of the AJK political spectrum with that of Pakistan proper would send a signal to the Indians that Pakistan was ready to absorb AJK on the basis of the status quo and recognize Kashmir's Line of Control as an international boundary. This was not a signal the military was prepared to send at this juncture.

¶16. (C) According to Mahmud, to keep the PML-N out of AJK, Zardari and the military leadership forced Farooq Haider's

Muslim Conference-Forward Block to reunite with the main Muslim Conference. Farooq Haider's price for agreeing to this was that he be made AJK's prime minister, replacing Sardar Yacoub.

¶17. (C) During an October 18 meeting with Deputy PolCouns, Barrister Sultan Mehmood, head of AJK's Muslim People's Party, gave a recounting of recent AJK political developments that tracked closely with Mahmud's version of events. He confirmed that the PPP and the military establishment opposed the appearance of the PML-N on the AJK political scene. Sultan Mehmood reported that the military, together with civilian authorities led by Kashmir Affairs Minister Qamar Zaman Kaira, had conducted a series of meetings in Islamabad with AJK political leaders to reunite the Muslim Conference.

¶18. (C) During an October 19 meeting with Deputy PolCouns, Youssef Naseem, a leader of the Pakistan branch of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), which is an alliance of political parties in India's State of Jammu and Kashmir, lamented Islamabad's interference in AJK politics. (Note: Naseem and his family are from Indian Kashmir. His wife is a Muslim Conference member of the AJK Legislative Assembly, holding one of twelve seats reserved for migrants from Indian Kashmir. End Note.) Naseem said this interference undermined efforts to showcase AJK's good, democratic governance and contrast it to the situation on the other side of Kashmir's Line of Control. He argued that President Zardari "got bad advice" in supporting splitting the Muslim Conference to oust AJK Prime Minister Sardar Attique and replace him with Sardar Yacoub in January 2009. Naseem's understanding was that Nawaz Sharif had recently called Prime Minister Gilani to insist that the government and military not meddle in AJK's politics.

¶19. (C) Comment: As our interlocutors made clear, the rapid turnover in the AJK prime minister's chair has principally been a result of political infighting, personality clashes,

and intervention from Islamabad -- and has had little to do with policy differences. That said, Farooq Haider is known as a proponent of the AJK government asserting more authority over internal AJK affairs. This may put him on a collision course with the key AJK bureaucrats -- Chief Secretary, Inspector General of Police, Accountant General, and Finance Secretary -- who are appointed by Islamabad's PPP-led government. Our interlocutors agreed that this could create problems for the stability of Farooq Haider's AJK government, perhaps leading to early elections some time early next year.

End Comment.

PATTERSON